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Alternative energy -- the key is defining it

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While much of the world scrambles to harness alternative sources of energy that create little pollution or global warming, don't trigger terrorism or war and are affordable, Florida is still grappling with a key question.

Just what is alternative energy?

It's more than a passing curiosity. In coming years, the state will attempt to nail down standards and incentives to steer planning by electric utilities, guide choices by residents and encourage companies to tap new sources of energy.

One goal of the Florida Energy Commission, a panel set up last year by the Legislature, is to help determine what is doable in a state where wind power, for example, doesn't hold a lot of promise but solar power and ocean currents are drawing lots of attention.

A commission sub-panel, the Advisory Group on Renewables, met Thursday at Orlando International Airport to hear reports from major Florida utilities about efforts to adopt alternatives to mainstays such as coal, natural gas and nuclear power.

The utilities "have come to the conclusion that America wants renewables," said Michael Dobson, president of the Florida Renewable Energy Producers Association.

At the end of Thursday's session, group members agreed that it would be difficult to proceed further without first defining renewable energy. Two examples underscored their concerns.

Hydrogen -- used either to fuel engines similar to those in cars or to feed fuel cells that produce electricity -- is touted for its potential because it is virtually free of pollution and available in great abundance.

Yet nearly all hydrogen is now extracted from non-renewable natural gas in a process that releases carbon dioxide, which is blamed for an acceleration of global warming.

However, technology may advance to provide a cheap and clean way of using solar power to extract hydrogen from water.

Burning household garbage to produce electricity also provokes controversy over

whether it should be called renewable energy.

While garbage left to rot in a landfill is a waste of energy to some, others see it as too toxic as a fuel and better dealt with through recycling and reduction.

Tommy Boroughs, chairman of the Florida Energy Commission, told the advisory group that the overall goal is to establish recommendations that will promote a "green environment and a green economy."

The commission and four advisory groups are meeting frequently in different cities to come up with a report for the Legislature late this year.

Their meeting dates are posted at www.floridaenergycommission.gov.

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